

Sermon Given by

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Mark 2:1-12 - "Only God can do that!"

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**'We've never seen anything like this'**. That was the conclusion of the episode we are looking at in Mark's gospel this morning. It was said in praise of God, with a sense of wonder at what people had seen. A man comes before Jesus paralysed and in full view of everyone he gets up completely healed and leaves carrying that mat which he had been lying on motionless only seconds earlier. We've never seen anything like this...

Of course it is the sort of comment that might easily be made with scepticism today: we've never seen anything like this, so we rather doubt that it happened.

But it's important for us to remember at the outset that the writer of this account is claiming that it is fact not fantasy. It's well attested that Mark has compiled his gospel from the Apostle Peter's eyewitness material. He certainly wants to stress the eyewitness nature of his sources. Did you notice how he reports that the man walked out **'in full view of them all'** in verse 12? It wasn't done behind closed doors and it wasn't done with mirrors.

Everybody saw what happened. And it isn't a story that has grown with the telling, over hundreds of years. It was witnessed and reported at a time not long after the event itself. This actually happened.

**<sup>1</sup>A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. <sup>2</sup>So many gathered that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them. <sup>3</sup>Some men came, bringing to him a paralytic, carried by four of them. <sup>4</sup>Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus and, after digging through it, lowered the mat the paralyzed man was lying on.** (Mark 2:1-4)

Of course people were amazed by the event itself – as you would be if this happened one day at church. No one would forget the day they took the roof

off during the service, would they? It would be amazing enough for a start if there were a crowd of people listening to a sermon! But then suddenly some dust starts falling on the preacher's notes; and then a shaft of light comes through the ceiling, then some more dust; and now the tiles are being lifted off. Next thing you know and four faces have appeared in the hole; and then would you believe it: a stretcher is being lowered down...

When you got back from the service for lunch you wouldn't wait to be asked: 'How was church?' 'Oh same as usual, as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be the Church of England, Amen'. You'd say straight away: 'you'll never guess what happened today'. And you'd still be telling people about it when you were eighty. The day the roof was lifted off.

The event is a complete one-off – too bizarre to be dreamt up. But let's try and analyse a little further what it was that struck them as so amazing. Here is the first thing.

### **Surprise no 1: Jesus' diagnosis:**

A man has been lowered through the roof - a white knuckle ride if ever there was one - only if he was paralysed he probably wasn't **able** to hold on for grim life. There he was, utterly defenceless on his mat. And what happens in verse 5. Just have a look... <sup>5</sup>***When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."***

Don't you think Jesus' disciples wanted to whisper a quiet word in his ear: 'Hey Jesus - I know it's been a long day, and I know it's tough when they jump the queue like this - but Jesus ... Look at his legs'.

Now obviously it wasn't that Jesus failed to notice his disability or that he didn't care. He was passionately concerned with human suffering whenever he encountered it. What Jesus is saying is that this man's sin needed even more urgent treatment than his physical condition.

And that is a surprise to us precisely because we've bought into a view of the world in which God doesn't figure. If we relegate God from involvement in our world, forgiveness from God doesn't seem a big deal to us.

Oh yes, we understand the importance of forgiveness on a human level. Hemingway has a short story about a Spanish father who longs to be reconciled with his son who has run away to Madrid. So he puts an ad in the paper El Liberal. 'Paco meet me at Hotel Montana, noon Tuesday. All is forgiven, Papa.' But Paco is a common name in Spain and when he goes to the square outside the hotel there are 800 sons waiting for their fathers!

Forgiveness between people – families, friends and so on – matters so much to us. But we don't easily think of forgiveness from God being a very significant issue. With God out of sight and mind we just don't think of our sin being directed against God personally. We define sin simply in terms of how we treat one another: 'I try not to do anyone any harm'... And if God comes into the picture at all, we shrug our shoulders and say, 'Well I know I'm not perfect, but surely I'm good enough for God'.

But how good is good enough? I mean, just suppose I am really good. 90% perfect. I match God's standards 90% of the time... In exam marks, that's an A star, very impressive... The problem is, it's the ten percent that's significant. Because if I rebel against God at any point at all, it means that I'm not actually, say, 10% a rebel. I'm 100% a rebel. Why? Because the 10% means that when it suits me I'll happily push God out of my life and live as I please. It's only by coincidence that the way I choose to live just happens to overlap with God's way 90% of the time. It's incidental, not deliberate. In fact I am, by nature, 100% a rebel.

If we could only see how serious that is... as soon as it dawns on us that God made me; that I'm just a tenant living in his universe; that he has the right to run my life.

And not only is he my Landlord, he's my Lover as well: he's come after me in the person of Jesus Christ, because he longs to know me.... think how great the personal offence of our rebellion against him is!

The Bible is very clear that situation won't go on forever. For the moment to be forgiven may not seem that big a deal. But to be personally out of step with God will one day be seen for the disaster that it is. God cannot let us rebel forever. And a day is coming after this earthly life when if our sin isn't forgiven it will have to be punished for ever: when God will ratify our decision to

exclude him from our lives, by excluding us from his presence... and exposing us to all the pain that that involves.

There is no fate that even comes close to that suffering, amidst all the things that mar our life now: the disability of this paralysed man; sickness, disease, stress, poverty: above all these, I need forgiveness. A shocking diagnosis...

Onto **a second surprise: Jesus claim**. What surprised the Pharisees was not that sin was so important but that Jesus thinks he can do the forgiving. Have a look at verses 6-7: ***<sup>6</sup>Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, <sup>7</sup>"Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"***

You see their problem: in claiming to forgive sins, Jesus is claiming to do something only God can do.

I don't think anyone has ever explained this as clearly as CS Lewis did. He put it like this: 'One part of Jesus claim tends to slip past us unnoticed, because we have heard it so often that we no longer see what it amounts to. I mean the claim to forgive sins, any sins.

'Now unless the speaker is God, this is really preposterous. We can all understand how a man forgives offences against himself. You tread on my toe and I forgive you; you steal my money and I forgive you.

'But what should we make of a man himself unrobbed and untrodden on who announces that he forgives you for treading on other men's toes and stealing other men's money?

'Yet this is what Jesus did. He told people that their sins were forgiven and never waited to consult all the other people whom their sins had undoubtedly injured.

'He unhesitatingly behaved as if he was the party chiefly concerned, the person chiefly offended in all offences.'

That's right – when Jesus forgives sin it is a shocking claim – he is saying that he is the God whose laws are broken and whose love is wounded in every sin. It is a monumental claim.

People sometimes try to say Jesus is a good teacher – and then leave it at that. But that is the one thing he can't be – it's been very well put in that stark

alternative: he's mad, bad or God. Jesus cannot be a simply a good man and a great teacher. Either he's much less – he's mad or bad – or he's much more than a great human being – he's God.

So we mustn't try to patronise Jesus – as if we can fob him off with faint praise, 'he's a great teacher'. He hasn't left that option open to us, with this amazing claim to be God.

The question is, then – can he back up that claim. So let's move on to a third and final surprise in the passage: **Jesus' authority.**

Let me read verses 8-12 <sup>8</sup>*Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, "Why are you thinking these things?"* <sup>9</sup>*Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk?'* <sup>10</sup>*But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins . . . ." He said to the paralytic,* <sup>11</sup>*"I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home."* <sup>12</sup>*He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"*

If you wanted evidence of Jesus' supernatural powers, then already that is there in the way he reads the Pharisees' minds: they have only been thinking that Jesus claim is outrageous; they haven't actually said a thing – and lo and behold suddenly their unspoken thoughts are broadcast for everyone to hear. That must have been pretty uncomfortable.

But notice how there is absolutely no attempt by Jesus to backtrack from his claim to forgive sins. He could have agreed with the Pharisees: 'Of course they're right: I didn't mean that I can forgive your sins – I mean that God does.

Instead he says: yes I can forgive sins; I have authority to forgive sins and here is how I can prove it. I'll heal his paralysis. I'll do what no one can deny has happened in the visible realm – a physical miracle - to show I can also do something amazing in the invisible realm – forgive sins.

And there and then the paralytic does what Jesus commands. Muscles which had atrophied through dis-use suddenly became strong, without any physiotherapy. Up he got and off he went. That is Jesus' authority: when he speaks amazing things happen.

It's no accident that here for the first time Jesus uses an authority title to describe himself. He is the Son of Man – which on one level tells us he's human. But also tells us he's more than human. The Son of Man in Daniel's vision (Daniel 7:13-14) is a divine figure worshipped by people all over the world, given authority and sovereign power, his kingdom will never be destroyed.

'That's me', says Jesus – 'I can pronounce the verdict of the last day on people's lives now: the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins on earth. If you hear it from me, you can know for sure you're forgiven, ahead of the day of judgement'. And the physical miracle he did shows it.

Of course we have a more powerful demonstration of it than anyone did that day. Because we stand this side of the cross of Jesus. That death – which we are going to remember at communion - is the reason Jesus can pronounce forgiveness.

It was easy enough for Jesus to say, 'your sins are forgiven' but it wasn't easy for him to deliver on that promise. It's not just a matter of waving a magic wand over our sin and making it disappear. In less than three years he would have to pay for our sins himself. He took their punishment, so we need not take that punishment ourselves, provided we are trusting in him. In that sense he has authority to forgive sins.

Well no wonder they said that day that they hadn't seen anything like it. What an amazing episode it was – surprise no 1 – Jesus diagnosis that sin is more serious even than a tragic disability. Surprise no 2 – Jesus claim: that claim to forgive sins is a claim to be God. Surprise no 3 – Jesus authority: he really can make that claim.

I'm sure that the paralytic was as surprised as anyone by it all. But you know I wonder if his surprise hasn't grown as the years have passed since the event. What would he say to us if we could interview him today?

'Well it was an amazing day. I must say when I was lying there on my mat and he said those words to me: 'Your sins are forgiven,' at first I just thought, 'Thanks for nothing; I wasn't thinking about my sins at all. But then he said I could get up – and all of a sudden I could stand up and walk. I ran out shouting for joy. I had another 30 years of life, I had a family and it was great to be alive and enjoy the normal blessings of life that so many people have... But now I've been with Christ for nearly 2000 years. And I realise now that what he said

about my body being healed was far less important than what he said about my sins being forgiven. That was the greatest blessing of all that he could give me’.

Can you echo his testimony at all? Or the crowds comment – ‘we have never seen anything like this’? If there is no sense of amazement with you, then it may well mean you’ve never really experienced the wonder of forgiveness as the paralysed man did. But if you can echo it, then never, never lose your sense of amazement at what Jesus Christ has done for you. And make sure you thank him today.

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Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)